Spotlight on Comprehension
Building a Literacy of Thoughtfulness

LINDA HOYT
with other leading experts
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Vocabulary and comprehension have a powerful relationship that is unparalleled in strength and importance (Duke and Reynolds 2005). While we know that overall vocabulary knowledge is an excellent predictor of comprehension ability, it is important to know how vocabulary is best developed.

Good vocabulary instruction is based on extensive and intensive reading experiences in which word-level awareness is nurtured and extended through discussion, modeling, and wide exposure to a diversity of richly written texts. In quality vocabulary instruction, the focus is on words that are interesting and/or have relationships to one another. Connections abound as students focus on relationships between words they already know and words they are learning. These words are then used multiple times in an array of meaningful contexts. Learners who are nourished by such an environment develop a strong sense of word consciousness (Graves and Watts-Taffe 2002) and a sense of wonder about words and how they can be used. The best word learning classrooms are filled with an intentional focus on vocabulary where students notice words and consider strategies for becoming word savvy.

How different this is from classrooms where well-meaning teachers pass out lists of unrelated words and ask students to write dictionary definitions, then use the words in sentences. Research suggests that this kind of rote
response to vocabulary instruction simply does not work (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002, Blachowicz and Fisher 2002, Stahl 1999.) and programs designed to teach vocabulary have often had surprisingly little affect on reading performance (Mazyinski 1983, Stahl and Fairbanks 1986).

Preteach Concepts Rather Than Words
Many experts suggest that we need to minimize preteaching of words before reading. If we preteach concepts instead of just words, the vocabulary that surrounds the concept will flow naturally and students enter a text with a conceptual knowledge to support comprehension. After the reading, individual words can be revisited using the context to assist in meaning making (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002, Ohanian 2002).

Time and Exposure
Vocabulary knowledge has been compared to a light dimmer switch. At its lowest levels, you notice there is light; as the light increases, the illumination gives a clearer and clearer view of the surroundings (Blachowicz and Fisher 2002). When a learner is introduced to a word, there is rote recognition that is quickly lost if there is not meaningful, purposeful use of the word and interaction with the word in diverse contexts. It is the deep, flexible knowledge of a word that enables a reader to apply it in many contexts over time.
Beginning in Kindergarten

The best teachers of vocabulary then are those who intentionally focus on vocabulary from kindergarten on and make learning words and concepts a part of each element of the day. This intentionality of word awareness can be facilitated in a number of ways:

1. Ensure that students spend a lot of time reading from a wide range of texts with well-crafted language.
2. Read to learners from richly written fiction and nonfiction sources, discussing interesting words.
3. Create a word-rich environment, celebrate words on the walls of your classroom.
4. Use a rich vocabulary when conversing with learners.
5. Study the concepts that underlie words.
6. Identify relationships between words.
7. Connect new words to words already known.
8. Help students develop strategies for independent word learning.
9. Model good word learning behaviors and your own curiosity about words.
10. Invite students to be word detectives, collecting interesting words and words that are important.
11. Save words in a notebook.
12. Give students opportunities to use words in meaningful ways.
13. Engage with fewer words; don’t try to cover so many that learning is superficial.
14. Link visualizations to word meanings.
15. Provide opportunities to make inferences about word meanings.
16. Have fun with language!

Max Brand (2004) writes that “word detectives are hidden in our classrooms, waiting for the opportunity to show their ability to uncover knowledge of words” (99). The following vocabulary support systems are designed...
Vocabulary Strategies

Vocabulary Teams
Divide the class into teams and ask each team member to find two words to bring to the attention of their group. They have a few days to select their words, mining them from their reading selections and from class read alouds. Each student explains what their words mean, tells why these particular words were selected, and explains why it is important for the group to know these words. Group members enter all words into their vocabulary logs with the goal of trying to use the words suggested by their teammates. They can use the words in conversation, in class discussions, and in writing. Team members support one another by trying to notice when a teammate uses one of the words.

After all words are presented, the team votes to select two of their words to submit to the class for whole class learning. The words nominated by the team for whole class learning must be accompanied by a rationale for why these words are important for everyone to know. Words selected for whole class learning are explored in depth through a variety of experiences throughout the week and will be posted on the wall to provide visual interest in the words. The following week, teams meet again and the cycle continues with a group of new words.

Personalizing Vocabulary
When personal connections can be made, vocabulary is more easily moved into long-term memory. To facilitate these connections, students can take vocabulary words and then consider ways to make connections.

Example: Write about a personal connection.

Thicket: This reminds me of the blackberry thickets that my mother used to make me navigate to help her pick blackberries.

Example: Sketch a connection.

Thicket:

Explain it in your own words.

A thicket is like _________________________________.

Chapter 18
Building a Robust Vocabulary
Vocabulary Mapping
There are a wide array of ways to map vocabulary words. The important aspects of a map are the visual display and the opportunity to link words and ideas together.

Word Map Example

K.I.D. Vocabulary
K.I.D. Vocabulary is a strategy that integrates word recognition with important information related to the word and a visual reminder to make it memorable.

Vocabulary Word: Murky
Key Word Important Information Draw to remember
Muddy Not clear

Where might you expect to see this word? How might it be used?
Murky. I would expect to see this word in a description of a stagnant pond or in a poem about mud puddles.


Word Theater
Similar to charades, teams of two review a reading passage and select words they think are interesting (Hoyt 1999). They then plan how to dramatize the words for another partner team. During the “word theater,” the observing team cannot say the word out loud, but they have to find it in the text.

Word Wizards
Students focus on using target vocabulary words outside of the classroom and then report back on how the words were used.

Sketch a Word
Like the game Pictionary, students take turns sketching something that will bring a certain word to mind for their team. They continue drawing until
someone in the team guesses the word. Words can be selected from content
area studies, read alouds, or literature selections.

**Word Replacement**
- Make a transparency of a page from a book, ensuring that the text is large
  enough for all students to read it easily. Underline a word or two and ask stu-
dents to work in teams to suggest words that could replace the ones you un-
derlined.
  - Example: The tiger *bounded* into the jungle.
  - Replacements for *bounded*? What would fit?

**Use Inference to Focus on Vocabulary**
- Inferences can help extend and enrich vocabulary development.
  - Example: Mrs. Wishy Washy. “Boys and girls, I have been thinking
    about Mrs. Wishy Washy. The book doesn’t say this, but I can infer that she
    was really *determined* to get those animals clean. What could we say about
    *determined*? What might it mean? What happened in the book that would
    show she was very *determined*?”
  - Example: Whales. “We have been reading about whales. As I think
    about the gray whale, the largest of them all, I think of the word *majestic*.
    Chat with your elbow partner for a moment about *majestic*. Why might I
    think that the gray whale is *majestic*? What do we know about whales that
    might make majestic a good word to describe them?”

**Text Talk**
- Beck and McKeown (2001) introduced Text Talk as a research and develop-
  ment project designed to improve comprehension and vocabulary. They re-
viewed children’s literature selections and chose three words from each to use
for vocabulary focus. The books were read to children in an interactive style
with stop points for open-ended questions during the read aloud. The three
focus words were written in large bold letters and placed on a bulletin board
next to the cover of the book. The teacher and students actively tried to use
the words and placed a tally mark next to the focus word each time one was
used in conversation or located in another book.

**Exploring Prefixes and Suffixes**
- While prefixes and suffixes are not enough to fully determine word meaning,
  they can, at times, be helpful clues. Teaching students that the word *graph*
can become *autograph, biography, geography, graphite, graphic*, and so on can
give them assistance in difficult, technical reading. Similarly, having an
awareness of common prefixes and suffixes can assist learners in determining
word meaning when context is insufficient. The * indicates those that are
most commonly occurring (Ohanian 2002) and make up half of the prefixed
words in English.
**Common Prefixes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ab-</td>
<td>away</td>
<td>Marlee is absent today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bi-</td>
<td>two</td>
<td>My bicycle has a flat tire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>com-</td>
<td>with</td>
<td>In math we combine numbers to add them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con-</td>
<td>together</td>
<td>Our teacher is at a conference today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>I am going to destroy the weeds that are choking my garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*dis-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>A disadvantage of living in Oregon is the rain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*in-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>That math problem is inaccurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*im-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>The cast kept my ankle immobile for six weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mis-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>I made a mistake on that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mono-</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>The speaker talked in a monotone and really put me to sleep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>Let's preview this chapter before we begin to read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re-</td>
<td>again</td>
<td>We will have to repair the roof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>super-</td>
<td>great</td>
<td>You were a superstar in science today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tele-</td>
<td>over a distance</td>
<td>We just got a cordless telephone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tri-</td>
<td>three</td>
<td>The tricycle is getting a little small for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*un-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>You look unhappy today.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common Suffixes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-able</td>
<td>able to</td>
<td>These shoes are really comfortable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-al</td>
<td>referring to</td>
<td>She has a lot of musical talent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-er</td>
<td>one who does</td>
<td>The rancher is rounding up his cattle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ful</td>
<td>full of</td>
<td>Those roses are beautiful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-less</td>
<td>without</td>
<td>I have been sleepless for three nights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ly</td>
<td>like</td>
<td>My son is becoming very manly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ment</td>
<td>state of</td>
<td>The Nike advertisement had great new shoes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ness</td>
<td>state of being</td>
<td>This book is just filled with foolishness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ous</td>
<td>full of</td>
<td>The curves ahead look really dangerous.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Word Sorts**

Word sorts (Hoyt 2003) can take many forms. This version emphasizes making connections between words and phrases to activate prior knowledge and ensure that students are seeing relationships between the terms. In this experience, learners will interact with the vocabulary words and phrases, before, during, and after reading.
First, target key words and phrases from a passage (fiction or content area material), then have the students sort the words and phrases into categories that make sense to them. Have them tell why they have clustered the words and phrases as they did. Next, have them group the words/phrases into partner pairs and make a statement that explains the connection.

Example: Predator  Fierce

Connecting statement: Predators can be fierce hunters.

Then create triads, clusters of three words/phrases, and make a connecting statement to show how the words are connected.

Next, read the passage. When you find a word or phrase in the text that was in the sort, set it aside. If you finish reading and have words/phrases left, reread to try to find them in the passage.

Finally, use the words/phrases to support a summary of your reading.

Summary

Show learners your passion for words. Let them see that you have fun using new words and learning what they mean. Consider alternatives to dictionary exercises and writing traditional sentences to create a culture of word savvy thinkers. Your students will reap the benefits of better comprehension, better written language, and richer oral expression as well.
References


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KEY QUESTIONS

1. Which of the vocabulary strategies in this article might you add to your collection of vocabulary support strategies?

2. How might you weave vocabulary connections into read alouds? What did you think of Text Talk?

3. How might you weave vocabulary connections into content-area studies? What modifications might you make?

4. How might you get kids excited about word learning?
A Checklist for Vocabulary Instruction

Does the physical environment show that vocabulary is important?
- Are there collaboratively made word lists on the wall?
- Is there a word wall?
- Is there a list of vocabulary strategies?
- Are content specific vocabulary words clearly evident?
- Do students keep a vocabulary journal?
- Is word play and word awareness a part of every day?

How does the teacher show that words are important?
- Are there two or more read alouds a day complete with discussion of interesting words?
- Is there a structure for students to collect words they find to be interesting?
- Is there a sense of excitement about word learning?
- Are interesting words explored in all dimensions of the curriculum?

Are strategies for exploring words modeled and practiced?
- Do learners engage in word sorts and word mapping?
- Are students encouraged to monitor their own attempts to use new words in daily conversation and in writing?
- Are strategies for understanding words modeled and demonstrated?
- Are word relationships and connections made evident?

Do the students have tools for word learning?
- Are they self-selecting vocabulary words to study?
- Are they comfortable with a dictionary and a thesaurus?
- Do they know how to use root words, prefixes, suffixes, and context to determine word meaning?
- Are they encouraged to use rich vocabulary in class discussions?
- Are students encouraged to create images or sketches to support word meaning?
- Are ELL's reminded to connect English words to native language counterparts?
Thinking About Words

Reader ___________________________ Date ________

While you are reading, your job is to be looking for words that you think are interesting. Collect your words in column #1. Jot what you think the word means. Be sure to tell why you think that is the meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interesting word</th>
<th>Where I found it</th>
<th>I think it means... because</th>
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Select the two words that you find most interesting. Look both of them up in the dictionary and the thesaurus. What did you notice?

Word 1

I noticed that:

Word 2

I noticed that:
Thinking About Words

Word Map

Non-example:

Words and phrases that explain it:

Target word

Connection:

Makes me think of:
Heads-Up on Vocabulary

Reader/Writer __________________________________________________________

When we study words and meaning, our writing and speaking get better. We under-
stand what we are reading and pay better attention to interesting words. Your job is to collect and try to use interesting words. Pay attention to words while you are reading and select some really interesting words to place in this box.

Select three words from those you collected. You are going to become good friends with these words, searching for them while you read and trying to use them in writing or in talking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The word</th>
<th>I found it in: (books and page #)</th>
<th>I used it: in my writing or in conversation</th>
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